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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000487

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2013  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: NEW HOUSE SPEAKER LAYS OUT PRIORITIES FOR  
AMBASSADOR

REF: A. MANILA 455 (AMBASSADOR URGES MILF CHIEF TO  
EMBRACE PEACE REJECT TERRORISTS)  
[1](#)B. MANILA 316 (HOUSE SPEAKER OUSTED MINDANAO  
REPRESENTATIVE TAKES OVER)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a cordial introductory meeting February 21 with the Ambassador, new House Speaker Prospero Nograles made clear his strong interest in a positive and productive relationship with the Ambassador and the USG on key issues of concern, including peace in his native Mindanao. The Ambassador congratulated Nograles on being elected the first Speaker from Mindanao, and stressed our interest in working closely both to strengthen U.S.-Philippine bilateral relations and to deepen the Embassy's ties with the Congress.

The Ambassador briefed on her recent meeting with MILF Chairman Murad (ref A) and goals of the Balikatan military exercise, while Nograles blamed the current anti-Balikatan rhetoric on a "noisy minority" in Mindanao. The Speaker laid out progressive plans for reshaping the tarnished image of the Congress, including a higher-profile role for younger members and improved voting and legislative drafting techniques, and asked for advice on setting up a Library of Congress for the Philippines. He was less specific about his legislative agenda, but said he would press for automated voting for future elections. Engaging and energetic, the Speaker portrayed himself as a plain "cowboy-type" during the discussion, but he is also clearly a political tactician, as he described with satisfaction his success in knitting together a "Mindanao block" of 50 legislators to balance other regional forces in the House. End summary.

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POLICY, NOT PROCESS?  
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[1](#)2. (C) Little more than two weeks into his tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives, Prospero "Boy" Nograles admitted to the Ambassador at an introductory meeting that he was still getting acclimated to the accelerated pace and daunting scope of the new duties he assumed Feb. 5 when he ousted former Speaker Jose De Venecia in a bitter political showdown sparked by charges of corruption in Malacanang Palace (ref B). Nograles acknowledged that despite five previous terms in Congress, he was taken aback by the sheer volume of administrative tasks shouldered by the Speaker, and made clear to House administrators he intended to focus much of his energies on his legislative agenda, and devolve more managerial duties to his deputy speakers and senior House staff. He voiced pride that he had overseen the election of Marilyn Yap as the House's first female Secretary General, or chief administrative and personnel officer.

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13. (C) The Ambassador warmly congratulated Nograles on assuming leadership of the House, noting that he was the first Speaker from Mindanao. She stressed the importance that the United States placed on deepening its strong and enduring ties with the Philippines, and said that a close working relationship with the Speaker and the Philippine House of Representatives was a top priority for the Mission. She described for Nograles her Feb. 19 visit with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leader Murad Ebrahim, saying that she had urged the MILF to seek more rapid progress toward peace, end support for terrorists, and make a clear commitment to stability and prosperity in Mindanao (ref A). She also explained for Nograles the Mission's efforts to allay concerns in Mindanao about the annual Balikatan exercises, stressing that only humanitarian activities would take place in Mindanao. Nograles acknowledged the Ambassador's comments, saying that "just a noisy minority" was responsible for the opposition to Balikatan, when in fact most people in Mindanao "love the U.S."

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SHAPING A LEGACY  
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14. (C) Despite his assertion that legislation was his prime concern, Nograles returned repeatedly to the theme of improving the House's performance and sagging public image. Noting that House members are limited to three terms in office, the Speaker said he categorized the House into three classes -- first-term, second-term and third-term members -- and that he intended to allot special tasks to each class.

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To project a more dynamic and reform-minded image of the Congress, the Speaker said he intended to have the press office push first-term members to the fore in dealing with the media. Clearly focused on a legacy project for his term as Speaker, Nograles said he would designate the third-term members under Rep. Teodoro Locsin to create a Library of Congress for the Philippines. The new library would be a resource for the House, for the Philippine public and students, particularly for those studying law as Nograles himself had. The Speaker welcomed the Ambassador's offer to have the Embassy's Public Affairs Section and Thomas Jefferson Information Center provide background and contacts for the U.S. Library of Congress.

15. (C) The Speaker was less clear on his legislative priorities for the House, though he did highlight his intention to make it easier for members -- especially more junior ones -- to submit legislative proposals. Saying that the proper drafting and research of bills was difficult and time-consuming, Nograles said he had told members to simply give him a two-page concept paper on an issue and their proposed legislative remedy, and he would have the House clerk research the issue, ensure it was not already covered by current legislation, and draft the bill. This would both ensure better legislation and make members more effective, Nograles asserted. The only personal legislative agenda item the Speaker did cite was his intention to introduce automated voting for the presidential election in 2010.

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MAKING MINDANAO A POLITICAL FORCE  
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16. (C) If he was less than effusive about his legislative agenda, the first Speaker to hail from Mindanao spoke with clear pride at having knit together a "Mindanao Block" of legislators who had agreed to vote together on issues of importance. According to Nograles, he could count on the support of 50 of the 52 legislators from Mindanao on any given issue. This would not only give Mindanao greater

weight in influencing the allocation of government resources, it would also put the country's poorest area more on a par politically with the other two major regions, Luzon and the Visayas, both of which already had their own political blocks in the House. (The Mindanao Congressional delegation consists of 11 Muslim and 41 Christian legislators, roughly mirroring the religious composition of Mindanao, which is 20 percent Muslim and 80 percent Christian. Nograles is a Christian.)

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COMMENT:  
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17. (C) Outgoing and engaging, Speaker Nograles portrayed himself as a straight-shooting "cowboy-type," a persona somewhat at odds with his wealthy roots in Davao and his scholastic achievements as a top-ranking law graduate in 1971. His focus on a more open, reformist and dynamic House was also a bit incongruous given his companions at the meeting, Foreign Affairs Committee chair Antonio Cuenco of Cebu and Dangerous Drugs Committee head Roque Ablan two of the longest-serving and most entrenched House members. Still, his commitment to a strong relationship with the USG and the Mission seems quite genuine, and in keeping with his positive stance on U.S.-Philippine ties over the years. Nograles' first visit to the U.S. since becoming Speaker will be for pleasure, not business, however, as he intends to fly to Las Vegas for the March 15 boxing rematch between Manny Pacquiao and Juan Manuel Marquez. "I hate to fly, but I never miss one of Manny's fights," the Speaker confided.

KENNEY